Who's afraid of the ecological apocalypse? Climate change and the production of the ethical subject

Introduction

Contemporary representations of environmental futures often feature disastrous, apocalyptic and catastrophic scenarios, particularly in film and popular culture.[1] One site in which this representation is prominent is in the climate change debate, where such narratives in relation to the environment can be found not only in popular culture, but also governmental statements (Brown, 2009; Huhne, 2011; King, 2004; Obama, 2010; Stern, 2006) and academic literature produced by Politics and International Relations (Caney, 2010; Dobson, 1999; Gardiner, 2009; Garvey, 2008; Hiskes, 2005; Page, 2007). Whilst disastrous scenarios are of course not new in the construction of political and ethical possibilities, the climate change debate has arguably occasioned an intensification of such scenarios and an increased interlacing of them into political and ethical narratives - to the extent that Mike Hulme (2006) argues that recent years have seen the birth of a 'new environmental phenomenon' of 'catastrophic climate change'. However, despite the ubiquity of such dire warnings, they seem to have motivated relatively little action by citizens on climate matters (Hulme, 2009).

One response to this perceived inertia, amongst activists, politicians, and liberal political theorists, is to turn to ethics to provide a motivational 'push' which obligates engagement with what might otherwise be thought of as temporally and spatially distant consequences of climate change, and which proposes the means and method of such engagement (Caney, 2006; Jamieson,

2001; Skrimshire, 2010). The field of ethics is seen by some as offering the potential for a progressive, alternative response to the threat of apocalyptic ecological futures (Hulme, 2009: 354). However, this article sounds a note of caution relating to the production of ethics informed by, or in response to, the ecological apocalypse narrative. Rather than approaching apocalyptic narratives as scenarios which have *failed* to generate action or motivation, the analysis here seeks to argue that they are in fact very *successful* in articulating a series of commonsensical assumptions which are then reproduced in the ethical debate. It is not only that, as Hulme argues, 'climate myths' reveal truths about the human condition (2009: 357), but that the shared assumptions about the subject found in the ethical debate also *(re)produce* such truths.

While the depoliticising effects of apocalyptic narratives have been the subject of substantial debate in a range of contexts pertaining to Politics and IR including Aradau and van Munster (2011); Baldwin (2012); de Goede and Randalls (2009); and Methmann and Rothe (2012), the implications of such narratives for the production of *ethical* claims in relation to climate change has received far less attention. The literature which engages explicitly with questions of ethics and climate change does not address the effects of the assumptions found in apocalyptic scenarios in framing or limiting treatment of this question (Garvey, 2008; Gardiner, 2009; Caney, 2006; Dobson, 1999; Page, 2007). What remains unexamined in existing approaches to the effects of apocalyptic imaginaries is the way that the language of apocalypse frames thinking about the ethics of climate change in fundamental ways through disseminating forceful but otherwise unacknowledged assumptions about the future, human relationships, human nature, political community and the relationship between humans and the environment.

Informed by the recent turn in Politics and IR towards an engagement with the aesthetic and cultural as powerful sites for the establishment and (re)production of claims about and practices of ethics in world politics (Bleiker 2001; Brassett, 2009; Croft, 2006; Grayson 2012; Weldes, 2003), the article analyses the (re)production of the ethical subject in ecological apocalypse narratives across seemingly divergent sites. The analysis draws from a range of cultural, academic and 'elite' narratives of the problem of climate change,[2] with a focus on the UK and US,[3] and reads these alongside calls for ethical motivation to interrogate the cultural production of climate ethics. These two discourses are read intertextually in order to illuminate their points of convergence and to identify the shared assumptions on which these rest. In so doing, the article contributes both a cultural and an ecological perspective to a body of post-foundational critical work in politics and IR that seeks to interrogate the production of ethics and the ethical subject (Bulley, 2009; Edkins, 2000; Jabri, 1998; Pin-Fat, 2009; Zehfuss, 2010).

The article offers a conceptually-driven analysis which, rather than developing 'better' ethical principles to 'solve' the problem of climate change, seeks to problematise the treatment of ethics as offering a progressive or alternative route to engaging with the threat of ecological apocalypse, and thereby to repoliticise the use of ethics in this debate The production of ethical common-sense matters because it determines the limits and possibilities of the subject outside of, or prior to, politics. Rather than an approach that applies ethics to the problem of climate change then, this article seeks to illustrate the way in which the ecological apocalypse framing acts as a point of orientation in the narrative of climate ethics, and to interrogate the effects of the coalescence of these two texts.

The overarching argument is that the ecological apocalypse and ethical motivation narratives are intertextually (re)produced in a way that sediments a particular logic of the ethical subject. Under the shadow of the apocalyptic imaginary the ethical subject of climate change is reproduced as non-relational in both spatial and temporal terms; as a self-contained, self-interested, autonomous and sovereign individual. Drawing on resources in post-foundational and relational thought I argue that configuring the ethical subject in this way makes responsive engagement with any order outside of the one which might be argued to have caused the ecological crisis in the first place, and with any other from whom ethical obligations might originate, very difficult. This means that rather than offering an alternative or response to the depoliticising and demotivating effects of the apocalyptic imaginary a climate ethics is articulated that reproduces its structuring logics. In attempting to render climate change ethically actionable through appeals to future disaster the possibility of responsive, ethical, engagement with the future is obscured.

The article first identifies and illustrates a narrative of disastrous ecological futures that can be found in current climate change debate. Such a framing is often explicitly designed to promote action on climate matters, but—as I will show below—there is a perception that it has failed to generate the right kind of action. I trace the way that ethics has been positioned as a response to the perceived failure of the climate disaster message. I then argue that there is a particular kind of apocalyptic logic that orients these intersecting discourses—one that produces an account of the future as a continuation of the present.

The second section explores the implications of the intersection of the climate disaster and ethical motivation narratives under this ordering logic of apocalypse. I argue that it produces the

ethical subject as non-relational through spatial and temporal assumptions and that such foreclosing of relation makes responsive ethical engagement very difficult. The final part of the paper suggests some of the implications of this non-relational construction of subjectivity for attempts to think progressively about climate change.

Ecological Futures

There are two influential texts that coalesce in contemporary debates about climate change. The first is the narrative of disastrous and apocalyptic renderings of ecological futures. The second is the claim that in order for progress to be made on climate issues those challenges need to be understood in ethical terms. The discussion that follows offers some examples of these two discursive strands and of their linking across a range of governmental, popular cultural, media and popular scientific outputs. I do not intend to suggest that these are the only narratives that can be identified in environmental debate, but that they are currently influential in determining the possibilities and limits of interventions framed in specifically ethical terms (De Goede and Randalls, 2009).

Contemporary popular culture offers the first example of the pervasive imagination of ecological collapse; from film outputs focusing directly on the imminent dangers of climate change as diverse as *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) and *Happy Feet* (Miller, 2006), to those such as *2012* or *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2009, 2004) in which the slow burn of ecological degradation is given a dramatic, accelerated makeover, to renderings of post-ecological-apocalypse as found in *The Road* (Hillcoat, 2009), *The Book of Eli* (Hughes, 2010), or *Wall-E* (Stanton, 2008). Similar themes can be found in literary fiction; for example Margaret

Atwood's (2009) *MaddAdam* Trilogy, Cormac McCarthy's (2006) *The Road*, and Marcel Theroux's (2010) *Far North*. Ecological disaster is coming, we are warned, it may be coming soon and suddenly, and its effect will be the collapse of civilisation.

As De Goede and Randalls (2009) have argued, Jacques Derrida's insights on the importance of the fable can be extended to a consideration of environmental fables. For Derrida, the fable cannot be dismissed as 'not real', because it has the effect of structuring society for the 'not real' belief, such that to distinguish fiction from reality becomes problematic. While Derrida's concern was nuclear apocalypse, and the war effort developed in response to that fiction, the effects of the imagination of ecological apocalypse operate in a similar way by structuring our responses to environmental problems. It is not just that popular culture, and, specifically, future-oriented science fiction offer a 'mirror' to reflect society (Buzan, 2010; Hulme, 2009) but that they also (re)produce that society (Weldes, 2003: 11) and tend to do so in such a way that, as Michael Shapiro has argued, 'endorse[s] prevailing power structures by helping to reproduce the beliefs and allegiances necessary for their uncontested functioning' (1992, cited in Weldes, 2003: 7).

The framing of climate change in terms of urgency and disaster is mirrored in media comment. In April 2014 *The Times* announced that 'We must act now to avert catastrophe of climate change'. *The Telegraph* reported on Prince Charles's 2009 Dimbleby lecture with the headline 'Next Generation Faces 'Living Hell' Unless Climate Change Tackled' (Khan, 2009), and in March 2014 (Mendick, 2014) featured comment from the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, with the headline claim that 'Lifestyle to blame for our climate catastrophe'. An article in *The Guardian* entitled 'Doomsday Clock Ticks Closer to Armageddon' (Osborne,

2007) reported on the movement in January 2007 of the doomsday clock two minutes closer to midnight by academics at the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, due in part to the effects of climate change, and in a more recent update *The Times* claimed in January 2015 that 'Apocalypse now closest for 60 years' (Keate, 2015). Runaway climate change is identified as increasing the threat of 'catastrophic damage to the planet' by Stephen Hawking in the same report, whilst Sir Martin Rees, the president of the Royal Society claims that 'climate change ... [has] the potential to end civilisation as we know it' (Osborne, 2007).

Kate Manzo (2012) has shown how a sense of temporal urgency is pervasive in media coverage of climate change - Google alone, she reports, provided 'about 74,400,000 results' when the phrase 'time is running out on climate change' was entered into the search engine in May 2012. Naomi Klein (2016), writing in *The Guardian* in April 2016, exemplifies this sense of temporal urgency with the headline 'We're out of time on climate change'. In its more extreme form this narrative can be seen in James Lovelock's (2006) well-publicised argument that climate change is already insoluble, and life on Earth will 'never be the same again' following the collapse of civilisation and the virtual extinction of humanity.

Governmental framings of the issue adopt a similar tone. In October 2009 then UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown described the costs of failing to address climate change as 'greater than the impact of the two world wars and the Great Depression', and that we face a 'catastrophe ... if present warming trends continue' (Brown, 2009). The chief scientific advisor to Tony Blair, Sir David King (2004), famously commented that 'climate change is the most severe problem that we are facing today'. The Stern Review on the economics of climate change opens with the

warning that 'the task is urgent. Delaying action, even by a decade or two, will take us into dangerous territory' (Stern, 2006).

Appeals to the claims of future generations also feature in governmental and media comment on climate change; in his 2015 state of the union address President Obama (2015) claimed that 'no challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change'. *An Inconvenient Truth* is framed by Al Gore (2006) as response to the question, from future generations, 'What were our parents thinking? Why didn't they wake up when they had a chance?'. John Kerry argued in 2014 that if present generations failed to act, they would be judged to have made a 'massive collective moral failure', adding: 'if we fail, future generations will not, and should not, forgive those who ignored this moment' (Webster, 2014).

The apocalyptic framing of climate change is at least in some instances expressly intended to galvanize action on ecological matters. *An Inconvenient Truth* is the most obvious example, but Roland Emmerich (2004) has also confirmed that *The Day After Tomorrow* was intended as a tool for motivating environmental action. The claims, above, that we are 'running out of time' are invoked alongside an exhortation to take urgent action. Indeed, Hulme (2009: 348) has argued that 'the purpose of environmental crisis rhetoric has always been to change the future'.

However, there is a disjuncture between the seeming force of disastrous narratives and the response which they might be thought of as designed to motivate. Progress on climate change remains, at best, slow. The UNEP Emissions Gap report warns that despite the progress indicated by the Paris Agreement to keep the rise in global average temperature below 2°C (the generally

accepted upper safe limit), the measures agreed do not go far enough, and leave the projected temperature rise at least 3°C by 2030 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2016). Although widespread, catastrophic narratives do not seem to have the effects which they might be intended to, or which might be expected (Gardiner, 2009; Lowe et al, 2006; Schmidt, 2006). Catastrophe images have been blamed in the UK for low levels of public understanding of, and engagement with, climate change (Manzo, 2012). Existing treatments of this problem focus on the behavioural and psychological impacts of inducing fear as a means of motivation, arguing that apocalyptic scenarios tend to produce 'apathy, disempowerment and scepticism' (Hulme, 2009: 342; Manzo, 2012; Blackmore et al, 2013; Kaplan, 2015).

Ethical Motivation

One response to this disjuncture is the argument that it is specifically *ethical* motivation to promote action on climate change that is lacking. Such an appeal is in many ways already contained within the ecological apocalypse text, which is, as De Goede and Randalls (2009: 860) have argued, an imagination of a future which is at the same time 'a vision of catastrophe and a call for action'. That is, discourses of ethical motivation and ecological apocalypse are intertextually produced; their relation determines the way in which each text is read and understood. Weldes (2003: 15) sets out one way of considering such an intertext as one in which there is 'deep metaphysical--epistemological and ontological--overlap across its constituent texts. Their structural homologies, in other words, extend to their most basic assumptions'. In the context of climate change, the ethics/apocalypse intertext matters because such overlap can be seen in assumptions about the nature of the ethical subject, the temporal and spatial contours of the relation between self and other, and the possibilities for political community. This intertext is

produced both explicitly and more implicitly, as the following sections go on to demonstrate.

We can see a direct linking of the 'ethical motivation' and 'climate apocalypse' narratives in two of the examples introduced above; The overarching message of the Stern Review is that the ethical problem posed by climate change is a collective action one; 'we' need to be motivated to act together to prevent the coming catastrophe. This framing is echoed in *An Inconvenient Truth* where Al Gore claims 'I don't really consider this a political issue, I consider it to be a moral issue', an issue around which 'we' must be motivated to 'do something' (Guggenheim, 2006). Klein's (2015) recent popular take on climate change is centred on the claim that campaigners need to motivate people by appealing to their sense of 'right and wrong'.

Focusing explicitly on the link between apocalyptic imaginaries and ethical motivation, authors such as Sarah Amsler (2010), Dale Jamieson (2001), and Stefan Skrimshire (2010) approach narratives of environmental catastrophe as designed to raise awareness, create fear or emotional connection and so motivate action. The disjuncture between the goals and the effects of apocalyptic imaginaries is understood in terms of a lack of ethical motivation or a lack of understanding or empathy. This connects to the broader claim that the ethical dimension of climate change has been ignored (Gardiner, 2009; Jamieson and Shue, 2010; Held et al, 2011), and that the motivation for progressive action and response requires a reframing of the issue as a 'global justice problem' (Barnett, 2007: 136).

There are two dominant ways of developing this framing of ethics as providing the motivational solution in the context of climate change; through pursuing questions firstly of cosmopolitanism,

and secondly of intergenerational justice. Both of these approaches tend to start from the observation that climate change presents us with spatial and temporal difficulties for thinking about ethics which need to be overcome in order for ethical thought to gain motivational purchase (Gardiner, 2009; Groves, 2014; Caney et al, 2010); in short, that we need to extend the sphere of moral concern though both space and time. As Garvey (2008: 51) puts it 'environmental ethics is largely in the business of expanding our conception of value or at least the number of things that we value'.

The first influential articulation of the argument that the ethical task is one of motivating response can be found in cosmopolitan ethical approaches. Since the environment is a cosmopolitan type of problem in that it affects us all, a broad cosmopolitan consensus is required to fight it, and the building of such a consensus is an ethical task (McIntosh, 2010; Hulme, 2010). Specifically, authors such as Caney (2006) and Singer (2002) develop this commitment in terms of an obligation shared amongst all humanity, or through principles of fairness or equality in respect of mitigation and/or adaptation. The problem to be overcome is the difficulty of motivating ethical concern at the global level; the challenges of climate change mean that we need to articulate an effective account of ethics 'globally', and can no longer sustain the 'ethical primacy of proximity' (Sachs and Santarius, 2007).

The second dominant strand in the existing literature is the question of our obligations to future generations; what the nature of those duties might be (Caney, 2006; Groves, 2014; Moellendorf, 2002; Singer, 2002), the temporal 'stretch' of our ethical duties, and how future uncertainty might 'weight' ethical concerns (Traxler, 2002). Much of this literature is also framed in terms of a

response to what Gardiner (2010: 91-92) calls 'a severe intergenerational collective action problem'; a motivational problem with the claim that we have duties to future generations, which it is the task of ethics to resolve.[4] This problem arises, Gardiner (2010) continues, because generations are ultimately self-interested and cannot, due to lack of temporal coexistence, influence each other's behaviour. Even in work which does not start from the assumption that generations are separate and self-interested, ethical motivation and the development of a moral reason to be concerned with future generations remains a central concern (Groves, 2014: 161, 163). Ethics must therefore take the sanctioning role. Thus, under the shadow of the apocalyptic imaginary, the debate on ethics and climate change becomes characterised by a shared logic of a collective action problem 'requiring' ethics to 'persuade us' to save the world.

Invoking Apocalypse

Orienting the production of the ethics of climate change from these various sites is a gesture towards the apocalyptic. The particular claims about disaster, time, urgency, politics, nature, and civilisation invoked here owe much to, and are unified by, a specific type of apocalyptic logic. The ecological crisis as rendered here is produced in terms of *apokalupsis*, or revelation.

The most obvious site in which the apocalyptic frame is invoked is in the example of the treatment of climate futures in popular film and literature. However, there are number of elements of apocalyptic thought which are also reproduced in media, governmental, and popular scientific treatments of ecological disaster. These relate in particular to treatments of time; the invocation of messianic time, time compression and urgency, and the broader sense of ending.

Apocalyptic treatments of time are characterised by the idea that time is directed towards a certain event (Methmann and Rothe, 2012) and that the apocalyptic era will see a period of accelerating development towards this end, or 'time compression' (Rayner and Heyward, 2016). More specifically, the apocalypse is linked to an idea of messianic time; an understanding of history as progressing time that will come to definitive end (Hoelzl, 2010: 98). This accelerated time is characterised by an outbreak of lawlessness prior to the revelation—the overcoming of ‘ambiguity, error and dispersal of sense' (Colebrook, 2012: 204). The claims in ecological disaster narratives that 'time is running out', that we are approaching a 'tipping point', and that we must 'act now' invoke precisely this sense of acceleration, time compression and urgency.

In traditional apocalyptic narratives the agent of the end of the world is God; an external force, outside of the time of history. However, in the (semi)-secular apocalypse invoked by ‘green millennarianism’ (Rayner and Heywood, 2016) this external position is occupied by nature; 'nature has spoken' proclaimed the tagline for *The Day After Tomorrow*. Similarly in claims about the 'end of civilization' nature is the mercurial God who must be appeased by changing our lifestyle (Mendick, 2014). If we fail to make these changes, lawlessness will ensue; 'living hell', the 'end of civilisation', and 'catastrophe'. The sense of the ecological disaster narrative is one of an ending—of civilisation, of the time of history.

However, the apocalyptic treatment of the end of history in specifically messianic terms—as a definitive end, a judgement, or the ushering in of the second coming—is referenced in a rather more oblique way in the ecological disaster narrative. As Bradley and Fletcher (2010: 6) argue, there are two dominant visions of the (apocalyptic) future in western thought. Firstly, the

messianic as the vision of an absolute future casting its apocalyptic shadow over present time. Secondly, the foregrounding of technical foresight, anticipation, or representation, and the image of the present absorbing all futurity into itself. We might think of these as two orientations towards the end of history: understood as bounding the traditional time in-between in which politics and history is possible, a time which is oriented always towards its end (Hoelzl, 2010: 103); or as the end of this very possibility of history, an escape from the time in-between to what Dillon (2015) has called the modern vision of an 'infinity of finite things'.

It is the second of these visions that dominates the apocalyptic futures developed in the climate disaster narrative. The ending towards which such narratives are directed is a continuation or intensification, rather than an 'ultimate discontinuity' (Neyrat, 2008: 35).[5] The future catastrophe of which they warn is neither redemptive nor destructive of the present; it does not give meaning or direction to present time. It is rather an extension of the present; a future envisioned as revelatory of the truths already inherent in the modern conception of the subject, nature, and community. These truths are arguably the very ones that have led to the climate crisis in the first place, and so their reinscription in the climate disaster narrative offers rather limited resources for inspiring or motivating alternatives. It is not only that the ecological apocalypse is, 'banal' in the sense that it is ubiquitous (De Goede and Randalls, 2011) but also in the sense that it is not apocalyptic enough, that it does not offer an ending.

Again, the most obvious example of this lack of 'ending' is in post-apocalyptic film and literature that illustrates—in addition to what has been lost—what remains or continues. The classic post-apocalyptic subject is the heroic, individualised, survivor who offers the possibility of living on

and redemption. On the one hand, as Houseman (2015) has argued, post-apocalyptic imaginaries rely on an 'epistemic break' through which the truths of the 'old' life cannot pass. However, such imaginaries also rely on an exploration of what remains. It is arguably the things that pass through the epistemic break in post-apocalyptic imaginaries which are of most importance, for it is only based on such continuation that the contours of the post-apocalyptic world are intelligible.

As Claire Colebrook (2012: 207) has argued, one distinctive feature of the imagination of ecological apocalypse is that 'we do not see our own end'; we have domesticated the apocalyptic imaginary by 'imagining a post-apocalyptic world of waste as still one of relative continuity'. This imaginary is not limited to science fiction; the Brundtland report's harnessing of the future as the terrain for a progressive project draws on the same discourse of the possibilities and persistence of the modern subject. I will go on to argue below that in the context of ecological crisis these assumptions about what continues place conceptual limits on ethical engagement with climate change. Rather than a future that is destructive of the present (Colebrook, 2012) that future is instead occupied by the projection of the present, and so is not futural at all. The ecological apocalypse future reveals only what we already know: those cognitive commitments to which we are most deeply attached.

The Subject of Climate Futures

While Hulme (2009: 358) has argued that the ‘myths’ around which climate change discourse can be organised—the lenses through which it is understood—are important because they reveal truths about the human condition, his analysis bypasses the way in which such claims to

revelation are themselves (re)productive of particular constellations of acceptable and commonsensical truths, some of which are deeply implicated in the creation of the ecological crisis to which they purport to respond. Claims about the threat of apocalypse, fictional or cinematic representations of the post-apocalyptic, and arguments that we need ethics to motivate action (re)produce a dominant framing in which they are understood to reveal a series of truths about the fundamental nature of humankind, its relationship with nature and its ethical possibilities. Although sometimes seemingly in contention, the logics that flow from these various revelations ultimately rely on shared, problematic, understandings of subjectivity, relationality, and time to which the article now turns.

One of the key elements which traverses the epistemic break in post-apocalyptic imaginaries is a particular conception of the subject. There are three common tropes that contribute to an understanding of human nature as non-relational in these imaginations. First, the lone survivor, seen returned to their 'natural' state (e.g. Lawrence, 2007). Second, and more commonly, the few survivors, each existing alone and living in fear of the others: without states and society nothing constrains our more base and selfish instincts (e.g. Theroux, 2010; McCarthy, 2006). Third, the group of survivors who tell a social contract story about banding together in order to place limits on a natural state of violence (e.g. Hogg, 2010). The ethical subject as imagined in these interlinked discourses is the individualised, rational, active and self-interested subject of modernity. This is a subject who survives despite, rather than because of, any centrally authorised action (Amin, 2013).

The focus on societal breakdown in the environmental disaster narrative (the 'coming

catastrophe') has the effect of separating out subjects from society and relationships. The truth of what the human is, this narrative tells us, can be seen once they are stripped bare of all external relationships and civilising influences. Such a logic assumes that the placing of humans in society is an add-on which needs to be looked beneath in order to find an origin. Future-oriented stories in turn provide this origin. These future imaginaries put forward a powerful framing of the possibilities and limitations of subjectivity by telling a story about the limits of what 'we' might be in the future, and in doing so also tell us the limits of what 'we' can be now. In this instance, the *content* of apocalyptic imaginaries reproduces an individualistic, non-relational account of subjectivity.

This same assumption about the non-relational subject can be seen in claims that ethics is needed to motivate people to act. That is, such claims rely on the idea that either there is something inherently individualistic and self interested about human nature, or that we have been 'led astray' (by consumer culture, capitalism, or variants on these) such that we have become produced as individualistic/self-interested. Ultimately both starting points lead to similar conclusions - that ethics is needed to either modify and civilise our barbaric tendencies, or that it is needed to overcome the influence of those forces which produce us as self-interested. The assumption is that we start off as not in relation and not responsible—with or for one another, future generations, or the natural world—and that we need ethics in order to produce a sense of relation and so responsibility.

More specifically, in approaches to ethics that see its task as one of extension, the assumption is that the ethical subject starts off as limited; as ethically motivated by proximity in both a spatial

and temporal sense. It is an appeal to the moral compass of individuals (Klein's exhortation that we appeal to people's 'sense of right and wrong') that they suppress their self-interest—an assumption once again that it is the heroic individual who has agentic capacity and to whom the ethical demand can be made. In turn this produces a particular kind of responsible subject, what Amin (2013) calls a 'neoliberal active subject'. Such a production is at the expense of other kinds of subjectivity or responsibility; central, state, or institutional responsibility, relational or communal subjects and so on.

However, the separated out individual is not the only subject (re)produced in the ecological apocalypse/ethical motivation narrative. In the context of climate catastrophe, opposition to this framing of the separated out subject is typically developed in terms of a seemingly contending narrative of the importance of a broad, cosmopolitan human community required to fight climate change. This can be seen in arguments about how 'we' are all 'in it together' (McIntosh, 2010), or how 'we' only have one planet (World Wildlife Fund, 2011).

This cosmopolitan approach is also, as discussed above, central to the 'ethics as motivation' narrative which seeks to develop an account of ethical demands which move beyond the limits of selfish, individualistic accounts of the subject; the ethical subject thus reimagined is part of a *global* ethical community. As Garvey (2013: 84) succinctly puts it, on this view, 'distance does not matter when it comes to what we ought to do'. The task of ethics is to foster this distinctly moral fact (arrived at through reason) despite the pull of proximity—the immediate, limited obligations under which we might consider ourselves to be operating.

Three interlinked assumptions about the ethical subject emerge in this 'alternative' approach. Firstly, humans become understood in biological, species-based terms. The 'species' is under threat, extinction is a possibility (UK Crisis Forum, 2011). Secondly, this biological narrative informs a civilizational narrative in which 'human civilization' must be preserved, putting in place further parameters of the ethically countable subject (Gore, 2006). Thirdly, the debate becomes framed in planetary terms; a 'global' concern requiring 'global' action and knowledge and so subordinating accounts of the subject as politically differentiated. The potentially critical ground is thus occupied in large part by arguments regarding the unity of the species, a vision of the globe as a whole, and a focus on commonalities (Garvey, 2006; Singer, 2002).

Such a focus foregrounds assumptions about commonalities which leads to an elision of political difference. In the argument that the key elements for the way of life to be sustained are 'business, railways, airports, roads, power stations', it becomes clear that the civilisations these narratives might seek to protect are neither universal nor neutral, in particular when the question of environmental sustainability is raised (Chorley and Owen 2010; Obama, 2010; Huhne, 2011). This cosmopolitanism obscures alternative visions for living together that do not rely on a universalising Eurocentric modernity. More specifically, as Jazeel (2011: 80) argues, the planetary perspective entails an approach which 'is to loose the bonds of the earth, escape the shackles of time, and dissolve the contingencies of daily life'. The call for global ethics then arguably elides the possibility of relationality, in the same way as the state of nature argument to which it is placed in opposition.

By framing the ecological crisis in planetary terms, and so seeking an ethics which operates also

on these terms, we fall into the trap, as Spivak (2003: 72) has put it, of 'talk[ing] planet-talk by way of an unexamined environmentalism, referring to an undivided 'natural' space rather than a differentiated political space'. Not only does this work in the interests of an abstraction that is inextricably tied to an arguably Western vision of modernity (Swyngedouw, 2010), but it also produces the ethical subject as a product of, and active in, this undivided, apolitical, natural space.

In addition to these limitations of the individualistic subject and the cosmopolitan subject as the poles around which ethical debate is structured, there is a more fundamental issue with the structure of alternatives it presents. Conceptualising the human as originally separate (the state of nature argument) or as part of a broader commonality (the cosmopolitan argument), while seemingly in contention, both rely upon a totalising and universalising understanding of subjectivity. The subject is *either* singular *or* plural, *either* an atomised individual *or* a part of a pre-defined community. The subject is never itself relational but always an element in or of relation (Nancy, 2000).

The Subject of Futural Ethics

While these assumptions about the ethical subject as either individual or communal are (re)produced in the *content* of the ecological apocalypse/ethical motivation imaginary, a further set of assumptions are reproduced by the *form* of such imaginaries. That is, the ordering logic of the relationship between the present and the future as set out in the apocalypse/ethics imaginary also limits the possibilities of the ethical subject. Specifically, treating ethics as futural, when that future is a continuation or projection of the present, makes it very difficult to provide an account of the ethical subject as relational.

Understandings of ethics in relation to climate change are often cast in terms of a relationship to the future, to the extent that Christopher Groves (2010: 107) has argued that 'all ethics is about the future'. This kind of claim however, can be understood in two ways. The dominant approach is one which treats ethics as principles which might then be extendable to the future, or principles which are derived from engaging with scenarios about the future in order to 'test' their scope and limits; extending existing moral theory and the options it offers outwards, as in considerations of the non-identity problem, for example (Parfit, 2010). We can see the pairing of this approach to ethics with the apocalyptic narrative in claims about ethical action and time compression, and the exhortation to be attentive to the ethical demands of future generations as outlined above.

The idea of future generations and what 'our' duties towards them might be is one key point at which the first articulation of the relationship between ethics and the future can be seen in operation. In exploring the way in which responsibility might be stretched over time, rather than distance or species, such approaches return to a focus on relationality and subjectivity. For example, the central questions animating analysis are whether future generations are to be weighted equally in ethical calculations, whether the fact that the future is uncertain mitigates their weighting, and how then to motivate ethical concern towards them (Gardiner, 2010).

However, the relationship between ethics and the future is arguably more complex than such accounts allow for. Ethics is also 'about the future' because conceptions of the future shape everyday ethical practices. That is, projections of the future are not neutral spaces in which to

then 'apply' ethics but are rather politically and ethically saturated imaginaries which (re)produce the limits and possibilities of ethics in the here and now. The projected future scenario which informs formulations of ethics is not a space which can be easily separated out in analytical terms as offering only a vision of the future consequences of current actions or inactions; the projection of climate futures in apocalyptic terms already frames what ethics might be before we even start thinking about extending it, through its revelation of truths about the subject. To imagine that we can think about ethical obligation to future generations in terms of a collective action problem of motivation caused by a lack of ethical relation between generations thus bypasses the way in which we are always already in relation with the future. It is not only that our projections of the future are reflective of our present concerns, but that those future projections in turn shape the present.

Approaches that start from an appreciation that we *are* in ethical relation with the future, which is the assumption that informs Groves' (2014) claim above, seem to offer a way out of this difficulty. Groves offers a care-based perspective on intergenerational ethics, which seeks to start with relationality in order to formulate an account of obligations to future generations without thinking in terms of competition and conflict, or distribution. Such an approach offers an acknowledgement of the way in which future generations are already enmeshed in our present 'webs of concern' (2014: 158). By starting with an account of our attachments in the present, we can, according to Groves, extend this to consider the future (2014: 189). However, whilst this type of approach is certainly attuned to the problems with a simple separation between current and future generations, Groves' model of interdependence and interconnection is nonetheless predominantly unidirectional. That is, we are in relation with future generations because our

actions will have an effect on them (2014: 22). The project remains one of extension and motivation (Groves, 2014: 158, 163) which sets out reasons for why we should be concerned with future generations, although starting from our existing attachments.

To return to the production of the subject in the ethics/apocalypse intertext, a key claim is that we need to motivate an extension of ethics into the future. Such a formulation assumes that the temporal distance between 'us' (now) and 'them' (future generations) is a potential barrier to ethical engagement (Garvey, 2013), or that future uncertainty provides this barrier (Groves, 2014), that it is the task of ethics to overcome. Ethics, on this reading, is about drawing out sound reasons for why we should be concerned with future generations and stimulating moral feeling towards them. However, when read with a particular apocalyptic imaginary of that future—a banal apocalyptic imaginary in which temporal distance is collapsed and the future enfolded into the present—the scope for thinking about relationality becomes rather curtailed. Perhaps it is not that future generations are too *distant* to inspire moral feeling but, in the same way that cosmopolitan approaches flatten the space for ethical engagement by determining in advance the content of the relationship between subjects, that they are too *close*—overdetermined, an extension of us.

Relation then is not (or not only) about what we do now having an impact on the future. Rather, understandings of the present and of the range of possible ethical practices are informed both by accounts of subjectivity put forward in future scenarios and also by the form of future imaginary itself. If, in the case of ecological apocalypse, the apocalyptic imaginary does not offer a sense of discontinuity then the imagination of the future which informs the articulation of the ethical

subject is not really futural at all. This means that to try to think about ethical relation stretched across time becomes very difficult. As Karen Pinkus (2010: 65) has pointed out with regard to the imagined conversation with future generations, that future is a continuation of us; they speak our language, we become one. There is then no other—temporally speaking—with whom to engage in relation. Although it works in the opposite direction, this determination of the subject can be seen even in approaches that attempt to foreground relationality. For Groves we know what future people are like because *they* are a product of *us* – they emerge as subjects only as part of our own webs of concern.

The politics of the non-relational subject

What are the implications of imagining a non-futural future as the horizon of our ethical theorising, the locus of ethical obligation, and the revelatory site of the possibilities of the ethical subject? If we want to conceptualise ethics in terms of responsive, relational, potentially disruptive engagement, then the (re)production of the non-relational subject in this way matters for thinking about ethics in the broadest of terms, a difficulty to which I will return below. However, in keeping with the focus on environmental and ecological discourses, this section will briefly outline some of the specifically environmental ethical and political implications of this conceptual limitation in thinking relation put in place by interpellating the ethical subject of climate change in this way.

Firstly, the framings I have identified limit imagination. They mean that alternative answers to questions about the world and the place of the human within it can be overlooked because the range of possible answers to these questions is already mapped out: 'we' are either individuals

distinct from nature and from future generations or part of a universal whole undifferentiated across time and space. The first account can be seen for example in the current UK Conservative government's approach to the problem of climate change as market-driven and individualist, in which motivation is assumed to be provided by self-interest (Caldecott and Dick, 2010; Stern, 2006).

More broadly, the 'motivational ethics' identified above—an ethics which is tied to a particular notion of the future—entails that the solutions and impetus provided by that ethics only makes sense in relation to that particular future. For such approaches to make sense we must retain the 'forward' momentum of the very modernist project that has arguably brought us to this point in the first place. That momentum is, however, as I have argued, not really futural at all, but an extension of the present. It is this which underpins strategies which attempt to do 'more of the same' in order to halt or reverse climate change; one example can be seen in the attempt to commodify nature, climate and the environment though market-oriented solutions such as carbon trading (Swyngedouw, 2010; Szerszynski, 2010).

Secondly, the focus on questions of time in the motivational ethics narrative acts to obscure political differentiation. The temporal and spatial elements of the climate apocalypse and motivational ethics narratives are not separate; their interconnection is one of the features that makes the coalescence of these discourses so powerful. In addition to the flattening of political differentiation enabled by the global cosmopolitan imaginary, a focus on the (non-futural) future as the site for ethical engagement with climate change contributes to this mapping. As Lee Edelman (2004) has argued, all future oriented politics is about securing the order of the same. In

a similar way, we can see how future oriented ethics effectively secures the order of the same more broadly speaking. If we read this alongside Emmanuel Levinas's conception of the order of the Same as the framework that constrains and determines alterity within already existing grids of knowledge and intelligibility then operating only within that order means that there is no possibility of relation or engagement with alterity (Levinas, 1969).[6]

The discourse of ethical motivation as relating specifically to *future* climate disaster then effectively sidesteps the spatial proximity of alterity by recourse to a temporal denial of alterity. Ethical motivation focuses on an imagination of the future in our own image, rather than an engagement with existing differences in spatial terms, for example the way that for many in the non-west climate disaster is not a future threat but a present reality (Hulme, 2009). By obscuring political differentiation through a focus on the human community and its extension into the future the ethical motivation message might be argued to miss its mark. The real problem posed by climate change, on at least one reading, is not the possibility of human extinction, but the prospect of 'increased misery to the very poorest in society' (Devlin, 2015).

Thirdly, the production of the non-relational subject as *either* individual or collective determines the potential distribution of responsive agency also to the individual or collective. The options are recycling and buying energy efficient lightbulbs, or advocating globally coordinated action. This distribution obscures the relationship between the individual and collective.

On the one hand, individualisation is appealing: we can change the world by changing our own lives. As Zizek has argued, 'There is ... something deceptively reassuring in our readiness to

assume guilt for the threats to our environment: we like to be guilty since, if we are guilty, then it all depends on us, we pull the strings of the catastrophe, and so in principle we can all save ourselves simply by changing our lives' (2011: 423). Such individualisation is also of course politically expedient because it is much easier to place the causes of global warming on the individual produced as selfish, short-sighted, and morally lacking than on the structures of neoliberal capitalism. On the other hand, collective response is formulated at the level of the global; ethically speaking this delegitimises small-scale communal attachments in favour of universal cosmopolitan ones. Or, more importantly, as discussed below, it determines in advance what attachments are needed and appropriate.

Both of these configurations obscure the way in which the individual and collective are mutually implicated rather than autonomous or oppositional sites. This organisation makes an interrogation of the global power relationships reproduced through individual lives (e.g. Paterson and Stripple, 2010) very difficult. Offering only an either/or account is then deeply depoliticising; the potentially fruitful dislocations occasioned by climate change are channelled in such a way that they do not challenge broader structuring logics. By proposing solutions in terms of 'more of the same' and buttressing rather than challenging the construction of the modern subject, the ethics/apocalypse intertext offers crisis management in such a way that the dominant order remains undisturbed.

These limitations are, however, the result of a very specific reading of future-oriented ethics, which is produced by the reduction of that future to the order of the same. Foregrounding the importance of alterity as a prerequisite to relationality offers resources not only for a critique of

this reduction, as above, but also for an alternative conception of future-oriented ethics. If the uncertainty of the future as a barrier to be overcome in the production of environmental ethics is instead approached as the condition of possibility for responsive engagement, then engagement with that uncertainty offers scope for reimagining the contours within which questions of the ethical subject are articulated. There being future-orientation in general is a different thing from determining the content of that future.

Affirming the alterity of the future changes our ethics and politics in the present on a more fundamental level. As I have argued elsewhere (author reference) such an affirmation shifts the scope of the ethical project from one of developing normative guidelines to one of opening up space for potentially responsive engagement. It is, on this reading, not that uncertain futures provide a barrier to thinking ethically, but that the futurity of the future is in fact a condition of possibility for ethical engagement. Attempts at providing normative guidelines are, on a general level, engaged in a project that seeks to domesticate, predict, control or determine future uncertainty. In order for normative guidelines to have purchase in the face of an uncertain future that future must be given intelligible coordinates by inserting a cardinal point in order that it can be considered part of our ethical landscape. It is the truth of the (attached, relational) subject who is projected to inhabit this future that provides such orientation. Normative guidance thus depends on truths about the subject that determine the future.

To argue that neither a conception of the subject, nor an explicit vision of the apocalyptic future can orient our engagement with that future is not to disengage with the long-term and long-range consequences of our actions. As Zygmunt Bauman (1993: 220) has argued, we need to visualise

the long range effects of our actions, but to be mindful of the fact that that vision is always uncertain, that 'the duty to visualize the future impact of action (undertaken or not undertaken) means acting under the pressure of acute uncertainty. The moral stance consists precisely in seeing to it that this uncertainty is neither dismissed nor suppressed, but consciously embraced.' For Bauman, what follows is caution, an ethics of self-limitation, of an awareness of the immense power our actions now have that means we should be careful and mindful.

As can be seen in Bauman's work, and in Levinas' from which it draws, the ethics which emerges from an engagement with uncertainty is not a normative ethical code and offers very minimal guidance, if any. Similarly, for Derrida, future-orientation consists in an exhortation to 'to let the future have a future, to let or make it come, or, in any case, to leave the possibility of the future open' (2002: 85). That future can be closed down both by its erasure and by its determination which leaves us with the difficult task of trying to ensure that we have a future at all (hence the need to be cautious in the use of our immense power) and that we let that future open as a future (hence the rather minimal guidelines regarding what such caution might involve). These two imperatives are contradictory, because attempts to determine the future – to provide prescriptive, normative, or visionary ethical or political codes that seek to ensure the possibility of a future – risk erasing it altogether.

Such a limited and cautious approach is of course open to the charge that it fails to offer enough substance with which to craft a prescriptive or visionary politics, that it fails to 'propose anything' through its fear of the violence done by such determinations (Bewes, 1997: 120). However, to resist those political projects that seek to close the future off, deny it, or determine it also involves violence. Such projects come both from the more obvious source of climate

sceptics and from those seeking to prompt engagement through appeals to apocalypse. Our positioning within the contradictory demands of the future arguably makes demands of its own. In recognising that engagement with an uncertain future is inescapably violent and that that violence cannot be resolved by recourse to ethics we are returned to the terrain of politics.

Conclusions

I have sought to problematise the idea that ethics—when it is structured by a particular apocalyptic logic—offers an alternative or solution to the lack of action on climate change. Despite their desire to motivate action or change thinking on climate change, the interplay of apocalyptic and ethical motivation discourses instead contributes to the production of the problem to which they seek to respond. This cultural production of ethics is one mechanism through which the depoliticising effects of apocalyptic imaginaries is operationalised. It is a particularly insidious one in this context because claims about the ethics of climate change are often positioned as offering the means to critique dominant framings of the issue.

As such, the broader implications of the argument made here are twofold. Firstly, the illustration of the political stakes of ethical claims in this particular context suggests the need for a suspicious approach towards claims that ethics can provide an alternative or critical ground more generally. Secondly, whilst the focus here has been on the confluence of the ethics and apocalypse discourses in the context of climate change, such a delimitation of course does not exhaust the contexts in which these texts operate. As such, the implications of the production of the non-relational subject are not limited to environmental issues. Narratives of ecological apocalypse effectively set out the ground for debate on a series of claims about the nature of

subjectivity, time and relationality that are at the heart of understanding ethical and political possibilities in the very broadest sense. These assumptions lead to a series of concrete problems by limiting imagination in terms of both formulating and proposing solutions to the problem of climate change; by circumscribing the range of ethico-political possibility they obscure the potential sites in which alternatives to current framings and responses might be found.

Climate change not only calls for responsive engagement, it also potentially offers a catalyst by which openings to such engagement might be realised. Through revitalising questions of the nature and time of human, and other, being, the global historical context of climate change, the political effects and usages of the 'natural', and the scales of political community at which the effects of climate change are felt and responded to, for example, many of the sedimented coordinates which determine the ground for engagement are potentially put into question. Climate change then offers an opportunity to re-imagine the potential and limitations of the subject. However, the framing of environmental issues in terms of apocalyptic ethics effectively forecloses this possibility.

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[1]Between 2001-2010 the following films were released: *The Core*; *The Day After Tomorrow*; *An Inconvenient Truth*; *Children of Men*; *I Am Legend*; *Wall E*; *The Road*; *2012*; *The Book of Eli*.

[2]These examples are intended to be illustrative rather than representative – their importance for the argument developed here is conferred by their reproduction in the 'ethical motivation' literature.

[3]This geographical focus was chosen because the literature which calls for ethical motivation is dominated by work from, and focusing on, the USA and UK.
[4]An exception is Hayward and Iwaki (2016) who address temporal justice as 'here and now'.
[5]The dominance of the idea of 'catastrophe' in narratives of climate futures is an apocalyptic rendering of catastrophe. This means that the potentially disruptive impact of catastrophe (Aradau and van Munster, 2011) is in this context neutralised.
[6]This is also why Groves' assigning of a moral duty towards future people because *they* are in *our* web, on this reading results in nullifying alterity. For Groves, however, such a Levinasian approach entails a problematic 'static, reified conception of uncertainty' (2014: 112).